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Certain Subjects? Working with Biography and Life-Writing in Historical Geography

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Edwin Morgan (1968)

Edwin Morgan reveals that with the passing of time, history begins to lose its presence; so much goes missing.¹ For the historical researcher the archive is the site where the past is sought and yet inevitably it is a place haunted by absence “where the materials of remembrance are living, dying and being devoured.”² However, in the writing of a life attention inevitably turns to what is present, what can be found,³ scavenged,⁴ riffled through,⁵ purchased by the highest bidder,⁶ stumbled upon,⁷ meticulously searched for,⁸ and visited.⁹ Historical geographers have spent, and continue to spend, time and creative energies investigating presences in life-writing and biography, drawing upon diverse materials, from documents to memories, artefacts to landscapes, detailing their historical usefulness, cryptic inaccuracies, beautiful distinctiveness and wider connections.

This paper follows in these traditions by bringing to the fore some of the complexities in biography and life-writing for historical geographers through three different lenses. Beginning with an introduction to biography and geography, the differing nature of geographers' engagement with writing lives through the archive is highlighted. The practice of researching and writing lives reveals itself to be a complex moving between, and through, what remains and what is no longer present. The first section explores these notions by demonstrating the contrasting ways in which historical and cultural geographers are working between absence and abundance in the recreation of lives. Continuing in this vein, the paper then turns to the practice of researching lives, exploring the differing archival encounters geographers are having in the

working *with* fragments of lives. Finally, the paper turns to the spatial stories of lives in order to bring to the fore the importance of taking geographical approaches to biography and life-writing, and the uncertain subjects that this work inevitably reveals. Throughout these sections, the text is punctuated with examples from the authors' own experience of working with biography and life-writing in these veins, in order to emphasize the differing approaches taken and the possibilities they suggest. These examples all differ in register and tone, and center on different research subjects, from an archival search for zoologist Hugh Cott, an archival encounter with psychiatrist R.D. Laing, to an archival exposition of pirate William Dampier. In using these examples in conjunction with the other narratives constructed, we wish to emphasize further the creative and multi-faceted approaches that are being explored by historical geographers in writing lives through the absence and abundance in the archive, and to highlight further engagements with biography and life-writing.

Biography and Geography

Classic biography can be described as the writing of a life, too often of "great men," traced and retold chronologically through a linear structure.¹⁰ This traditional approach is characterized by the view of an individual as the creator of meaning, which the biographer can access through "an empirical, material basis," thus, writing stories that "reflect a lived experience."¹¹ The focus in a classic biography is to know and understand the life of the person at the center of the study. However, since the cultural turn, biography has been influenced by post-modernism and the focus has increasingly been placed on plurality, previously unheard voices and the biography's "performance" or "collaboration" with and between the individual at the center of the biography and the biographer.¹² Contributing to this shift in biography, geographers have identified the potential of framing biographies not through the temporal, by simple chronology, but through the various spatialities of a life.¹³ Hayden Lorimer has suggested that we need not narrate subjects' entire life histories as "a fixed arc that begins, happens and ends," but instead construct "more mobile biographies told through different episodes or moments happening within the longer context of a life."¹⁴

This interest in the telling of lives through the materials and memories left behind has led to an increasing volume of literature that connects historical geography, sometimes problematically, to biography.¹⁵ In a special issue of the *Journal of Historical Geography*, Stephen Daniels and Catherine Nash chart the close connections between the art of geography and the art of biography, stating that "life histories are also, to coin a phrase, life geographies."¹⁶ Concentrating on the geographical lexicon of the lifepath, they highlight how an increasing attempt has been made to situate individuals under consideration within their wider worldly context. This resonates greatly with Hayden Lorimer's many attempts to creatively explore and retell geography's "small stories" through everyday sites, subjects and experiences.¹⁷ By adjusting focus to bring into view the "ordinary social lives"¹⁸ of reindeer herders,¹⁹ ornithologists²⁰ and field course participants,²¹ Lorimer captures the importance of narrating tales in order to expose the possibilities of understanding their intimate geographical relations. Taking an altogether different approach, Miles Ogborn has recently traced the "biographies of some of those whose work, ideas, relationships and struggles" helped to shape the "histories and geographies of trade, settlement, colonisation, empire building, piracy, slavery and science" in the making of a "new world of global connection."²² "Telling the tales of their lives as part of these global changes," Ogborn writes, "sheds new light on how we think of their biographies, and it offers a renewed perspective on the history of globalisation and on global history."²³ However, investigating

and piecing together such biographies can be an incredibly complex venture that challenges the researcher to construct a portrait from what remains but also through what is missing, which the following section will now seek to examine.

Between Absence and Abundance

Biography has the potential for resurrecting in new forms past lives and narratives; it is a means to mediate between memory and history, and to allow different perspectives on these narratives to be explored.²⁴ Yet, nonetheless, biography and life-writing can be troublesome methods. Historical studies which take lives at their center continually grapple with a subject who forever evades firm grasp. Mary Terrall explains that biography, “in some manner brings back to life someone from the past, known to the present only through material traces left behind”²⁵ Therefore, in historical geographies, when dealing with biography or lives, there is the continuous jarring of the missing coupled with the present. This discord is the echo of the archive; the site of creative becoming. That the archive is fragmentary in nature is well accounted, yet less well acknowledged is that it is a site, rather paradoxically, characterised and shaped by both absence *and* abundance. Caroline Steedman has pointed out that, “[i]n actual Archives, though the bundles may be mountainous, there isn’t in fact, very much there. The Archive is not potentially made up of everything ... and it is not the fathomless and timeless place in which nothing goes away.”²⁶

Yet, so often, the inverse can be true, although the archive does not contain *everything*, it can amass rather a lot. Diaries, manuscripts, letters, maps, photographs, ledgers, journals, committee minutes, memos, films and objects to name but a few, which are stored and stuffed into envelopes and folders, which are boxed and bundled, until a pencil filled request form, or an electronic order retrieves them for contemporary historical reimagining. For the researcher, this volume of “stuff”, that the archive possesses, can be tiresome in nature. There are duplicates and drafts, which are edited and re-edited, memos which circulate, resurfacing in folder after folder. There are exchanges that span years and exchanges on these exchanges. The task, therefore, is to somehow sift through to seek, sort and order history’s remnants into a narrative.

Thus, of late this notion of absence in life-writing and biography, in piecing together fragments embedded with gaps, silences and forgotten moments, has led to a questioning of the historical geographer’s method and has therefore driven many creative attempts to engage with, and work through, these fragmentary encounters.²⁷ Terri-Ann White, in recalling family stories of Perth from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, reveals,

I have become a collector of shards. Shards of memory, things passed down: told to me at the end of this long line of telling. I want to catch these shards, these half-lit, often, paste jewels. I don’t know how authentic they are, does it even matter? For me it doesn’t matter. I am making anew, building something from the remains. Wanting to honour the fleeting; the fragment, fractured histories and stories. Not passed down, but dredged up.²⁸

Through a focus on creative writing, on breaking down the boundaries between conventional genres of history, autobiography, memoir and fiction, White incorporates elements of absence into her narratives, stating explicitly that it is the very gaps and silences that are driving her storytelling.²⁹ This reclamation of storytelling, by historical geographers, to tell past lives through thickly descriptive and imaginative prose is also demonstrated by Lorimer in his work on the telling of a particular family’s past and their hinterland.³⁰

The recognition that certain memories, are still being lived by family members and local communities, leads the narrator to carefully negotiate the delicate narrative through the gaps and silences. Many biographical 'facts,' subject of course to interpretation, do often exist and lie around quietly in archives of all forms waiting to be turned into stories. However, as Hermione Lee has cautiously argued, "these facts have owners: they belong to the lives of the biographer's subject and the people whom the subject knew, loved, hated, worked with or brought up, or perhaps met once in the street in passing," and because of this belief in ownership many individuals feel a claim over the 'fact' that concerns them.³¹

The approaches demonstrated by White and Lorimer alludes to a deeper methodological issue that confronts the historical geographer who attempts to recall past lives. In using a range of 'sources' that are inherently fragmented and often dispersed, to uncover and shape the narratives of past lives through their spacings, the question inevitably turn to the practice of the archive itself. Caitlin DeSilvey argues that a recently emerging body of work in historical geography draws its strength from partiality and incompleteness, and therefore directly addresses the inherent difficulty in attempting to recount past moments and lives.³² DeSilvey suggests that part of this difficulty can be avoided if complete mastery over a topic or subject no longer becomes the main aim. In embracing the more incomplete qualities of a life such as the "alternatives, missed chances, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole "swarm of possibilities" that hums around our every experience," however, the stories become less certain but more open to shifting in shape and form.³³ What makes these stories so compelling is their characters and how they encounter and engage with the worlds around them; how they know their own geographies. The (geographical) biographer attempts to create "something half-way between a vivid but distorted portrait of the subject and an integrated but indistinct figure in the landscape,"³⁴ and it is at this point that the researcher turns to the archive, with recognition and acceptance of its partiality, for assistance.

Thus, the archive is a site of tension; tension between what the archive holds and what it is missing. Inevitably, alongside the present entities of diaries, manuscripts, buildings, people, photographs, letters, films and objects, remains the inescapable element of absence, which cast ghostly shadows of doubt and uncertainty over all historical research. Lee has warned that often in biography there has been a desire for the researcher to try to "make a coherent narrative out of missing documents as well as existing ones; a whole figure out of body parts."³⁵ A process whereby a once vibrant life is flattened, its narration bleached into a tired sepia photography. Historical geographers, by employing a spatial lens in order to navigate absence, and balance the abundance of the archive, research the geographies and spatialities of a life or lives. These approaches demonstrate different ways in which absence and abundance can be utilized in the writing of lives, which is further detailed in the following example.

An Archival Search for Hugh Cott

Dr. Hugh Cott (1900-1987) was an eminent zoologist who turned his hand to developing British military camouflage in WWII. In approaching the cultures and geographies of military conflict, a scientific biography was charted focusing on the interconnecting sites and spacings between Cott, his science and camouflage, in order to write a multi-faceted biography of camouflage's life-path. In particular, the sites of the field, boardroom, training ground and battlefield were key in tracing the mutual biographies of Cott and camouflage. Paradoxically, where the archive was most voluminous on the emergence of camouflage, the battlefield, Cott's own experiences of conflict and camouflage were absent. Thus, the issue of the "military archive,"

especially how to utilize it as a means of getting at the embodied aspects of military experience in order to write of lively military lives - human and nonhuman - became a methodological and archival challenge, an exercise in working with, and through, absence and abundance.

If, as Thomas Osborne states, “archives have beginnings but not origins, they are both controlled by gatekeepers and worked upon, are never innocent,”³⁶ then military archival sources have in the process of production almost certainly already undergone a particularly fierce round of editing and checking. Official military documents are informative in content, pared in delivery and commonly sealed from prying interpretation, until their period of confidentiality has expired. They may be rich in detail (recording precisely the “wheres”, “whens” and “hows” of battle plans, fields and operations), yet for documents that record so much action and bloodletting they are often dry in tone. While soldier’s actions are accounted for, the visceral experience in these sources is left to linger un-commented. Thus, the challenge in locating Cott and his battlefield experiences was how to get under the clipped language, to consider the experiences as well as the strategic impacts and effects.

The long-running and copious correspondence between Cott and his mentor and friend Professor Graham Kerr, had been central in Cott and camouflage’s mutual archive, as it had served to give Cott’s personal perspective on WWII camouflage innovation. Yet, after Cott’s arrival in Egypt in 1941, the collegial correspondence appears to end quite suddenly, or at least it has not been preserved. Thus, there is no means directly to get at Cott’s experiences of the Desert War. In an effort to account for Cott’s corporeal experience of WWII, the reach of the military camouflage archive was extended beyond the traditional sites of military documentation such as the National Archives, the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Engineers Library and Museum, and beyond official reports and documentation. This approach included archival forays in zoology museums, castles and modern art galleries. From these efforts, the seeming dryness of military reports was duly supplemented by photographs, sketches, water colours, scientific illustrations, zoological field reports, scientific books, lectures, personal correspondence, dioramas, diaries and memoirs, most of which are spatially and temporally scattered and scrappy. Thus, researching the military through the archive became an exercise in piecing together diverse and distributed remnants. In practice, this archival search for Cott in the battlefield meant that although his personal account was absent, from the abundance of diverse material collected he could be located and his biography in the battlefield fleshed out.

For example, from studying the accounts of soldiers who undertook camouflage training at the Middle East Camouflage School, the School’s War Diary - setting out the daily routines, lectures and instructors - and reading memoirs of fellow camoufleurs who knew and wrote their impressions of Cott, led to a deciphering of Cott’s camouflage duties and habits. Moreover, a feel for Cott’s Desert War experiences was fashioned. Reading *Zoological Photography in Practice*, Cott begins to describe the trying conditions of zoological study in the desert, with “extremes of heat and cold, and violent wind storms,”³⁷ and there are photographs of desert snakes, grasshoppers and aerial views of the Libyan desert. Although Cott’s own narrative of his experience in the Desert War is absent, inferred impressions can be shaped by bringing these diverse sources into correspondence. As such, memory, history, geography and storytelling were marshalled to make Cott’s biography, which was less an attempt to rescue *him* from the archives or history, more a will to retrace and recount parts of his life and something of his selves. Cott’s and camouflage’s biography works to reveal that “to tell a story, then, is to *relate*, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own.”³⁸ Their biography also reveals that the archive is a site of tension between the abundance of material and the absence of enough, or the ‘right’ kind, of material to create a life under study. However, as shown through spatial

attentiveness, this tension allows for creative possibility, particularly with reference to the archival encounter itself, and this is where this paper now turns.

Working with Fragments of Lives

As previously stated through the example of Hugh Cott and camouflage's biography, this notion of working with, and through, absence and abundance to create a portrait of a life, has driven many historical and cultural geographers to think more carefully about their encounters with the archive. As Laura Cameron eloquently observes in her study of Arthur Tansley, "[p]eople always are more than we know," and geographers, with this in mind, have increasingly been interested in seeking innovative ways in which to tease out the traces of a life and glimpse at what makes us human, through the absences and abundances of the archive.³⁹ This section aims to highlight, through selected examples, some of the many attempts by geographers to present or re-present lives through different modes of archival encounters, in order to reveal in more detail the curious relationships geographers are currently having with the archive. Leading on from this, an example from one of the author's own research into the life of psychiatrist R.D. Laing will be utilized to pave the way forward for thinking in more detail about why these creative encounters are significant in the ways in which geographers are engaging with biography and life-writing.

For many researchers of the past, the archive holds a dual purpose of source and site.⁴⁰ Not only does it act as a repository to many historical researchers, but it can also become "a place of dreams."⁴¹ As a source that helps the life-writer collate and capture snippets of information about the moments of their subject's lives, the archive can become a treasure trove of wonderment. Yet, as Steedman has noted, collected within the many piles of paper, electronic files and folders lies, in reflection to a *life* itself, not very much at all.⁴² She argues that often the archive is made from a range of "selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past *and* from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there."⁴³ It is this limited (or at times seemingly limitless) collection of "stuff" and, importantly, what is done with it that curiously becomes the researcher's gold. On their own, the materials that sit quietly on the shelves within the archive do nothing until they are read and used by the researcher, and it is precisely because of this intriguing relationship that exists between the archive and the researcher, that an increasing number of historical geographers have turned their attention to discussing the archival encounter.⁴⁴

Although the archive as a source can, for many geographers, open up new and exciting possibilities for their research into the lives of another, it can equally, as shown in the example into the life of Hugh Cott, cause immense frustration for those searching for the missing pieces that may help shed new light on their subject's experiences and encounters. The associations with this dual encounter can be clearly demonstrated through the exciting and innovative work recently produced by geographers into the lives of those within the discipline itself.⁴⁵ An example of such work is Innes Keighren's insightful journey into the everyday details of American geomorphologist William Morris Davis's ordinary life, which seeks to chart the important connections between public and private lives in the constructing of scholarly biographies.⁴⁶ Opening with a reference to Davis's preferred breakfast cereal, Keighren argues that there is distinctive value in engaging with "the commonplace detail of past geographers' lives,"⁴⁷ found in archival collections that all too often are disregarded in the writing of scholarly lives. This is because, he argues, "[t]o limit the biographies we write to the aspects of geographers' personal lives that seem to correspond directly with their professional achievements is to mute a potentially enlivening palette of

individual and subjective experience,” and it is within this interchange between “professional life and personal matrix” that these archival items can be used to explore.⁴⁸

Many comparisons have been made between the figure of the biographer and the detective, with both attempting to solve difficult cases by meticulously searching through the evidence and following the clues.⁴⁹ However, in attempting to piece together scattered fragments of evidence from the archive it quickly becomes evident that, as Ogborn has noted, the politics of the creation and preservation process is an uneasily negotiated minefield. In his critical analysis of the archive, Ogborn argues that what is created and what survives is part of a wider social and political process that reveals much about the conditions under which different kinds of information is used, evaluated and produced, and therefore plays a significant part in the ways in which geographers utilise archives and tell the stories of their subject’s lives.⁵⁰ These issues are explicitly addressed through the various portraits of ‘imperial lives’ that are presented in David Lambert and Alan Lester’s edited collection *Colonial Lives across the British Empire*. The stories of the extraordinary men and women who all at one point dwelt in colonial space that are revealed in this collection, pose crucial questions in highlighting the different ways in which these individuals made the British Empire, and the ways in which the empire undoubtedly made them.⁵¹ However, this collection also demonstrates the creative ways in which these lives can be traced and uncovered through networks of different kinds, and the importance of doing so for reimagining the geographies of the British Empire.

Barbara Johnson argues that “to be observed is to be dispossessed: our lives are precisely what we can never own,” alluding to difficulties in the practicalities of researching lives.⁵² Cameron, in charting the releasing and publishing of a record of a dream from the Sigmund Freud Archives, comments on the complexities of negotiating between the claims of ownership over lives and “the social life of stories”.⁵³ Through this research conundrum she ponders that, “[f]or archivists, respect might just mean treating papers with delicacy and clean fingers, but when the papers lead us, as they inevitably do, to living stories, messy history, is there a time when giving respect might mean leaving certain papers and people alone?”⁵⁴ This is a common cause for concern for those engaged in archival research with biography and life-writing, and it has been noted that often the death of the subject results in the birth of the estate. This can often be where the contestation over the control of a life begins, a process that inevitably seeps into the workings of the archival encounter. However, recent work in historical geographical on the collaborative practices of working-with personal archives, by Paul Ashmore, Ruth Craggs and Hannah Neate, demonstrates the productive nature of “working-with” archive owners in the domestic setting. The authors, through their own encounter with the personal collection belonging to journalist and political commentator Derek Ingram, argue that “working-with owners of personal archives is more than a route to specific archival objects.” Instead, “[c]onversations, divergences and stories emerge that would otherwise remain hidden and in turn feed back into the understandings of archival material.”⁵⁵

What these limited, yet telling, examples demonstrate is the important considerations made by geographers that remnants of lives can exist everywhere and nowhere, in hearts and minds as well as in (the most mundane) material traces. That lives are not static, but moving, varied and in constant flux, has diversified the nature of archival encounters in the presenting or re-presenting of subject’s lives. These notions of working *with* fragments of lives in differing archival encounters will now be demonstrated further through a personal narrative account of one author’s own research encounter in the writing of lives.

An Archival Encounter with R.D. Laing

These notions of attempting to tease out the lives of one's subject through different modes of archival encounters, and the complex paths they weave through different types of material and non-material remnants, is evident in an archival encounter of my own. My [McGeachan] personal experience of working on the complexities of lives centers on an attempt to create a geographical biography of Scottish-born psychiatrist, psychotherapist and sometimes psychoanalyst, Ronald David Laing (1927-1989).⁵⁶ Known most prominently in the media as a drunken radical associated with the Anti-psychiatry movement in 1960s Britain, but in other circles remembered and celebrated for his humane approach to psychiatry; this was a life that I was keen to explore. Kay Carmichael argues that "anyone who tries to categorise this man is in difficulties," due in part to the multiple nature of the lives that he lived.⁵⁷

Working with his archive, which comprises a substantial collection of diaries, recordings, manuscripts, letters, photographs, case notes and artefacts, I attempted to study the impact that certain spaces, sites and places of his early life had on his theoretical work and clinical practice, thus taking a geographical perspective to his biography.⁵⁸ This project drove me to create a portrait of Laing based upon my geographical sensibilities to the material traces that I uncovered from his collection. However, although the partiality of my subject was inevitably present in the final work, the slipperiness of writing lives was brought into sharper focus through a different kind of related archival encounter.

On completion of this previous project, I undertook a film project in collaboration with Glasgow Museums, which aimed to collect and record memories from members of the Laing family, in order to unearth stories about Laing that do not appear anywhere in material form.⁵⁹ In dialogue with three of Laing's children – Adrian, Karen and Fiona – the project decided to film the participants in particular sites and spaces of the city of Glasgow, where Laing lived and worked for the first twenty-five years of his life, in order to draw upon the nature of these sites and spaces in invoking a different set of memories from that of the more standard interviews that had previously been recorded. Part of this process involved taking Adrian, Karen and Fiona to the archive in order to look over their father's materials, and it was within this encounter that the intricacies of tracing a life through the archive was brought to the fore.

Laid out on a large wooden table in the archive lay a collection of Laing's diaries of his time spent in the British Army: notebooks containing his thoughts on philosophy, psychoanalysis and religion; manuscripts of his most critically acclaimed work; photographs of family and friends; record sleeves that he had worked on; and legal documents relating to his publication contracts. These were all materials that I had used myself in the creation of my geographical biography of Laing, and I was keen to observe the differences between my workings on such items and their own. Adrian excitably touching and handling (much to the archivist's dismay) the notebooks, walking around the room reading the details of the materials aloud, was a fascinating spectacle to behold. Less attention was paid by Adrian to the details within the diaries but instead to the dates, times and places that they alluded to. Frequently recited were moments of "Remember Karen, where mum and dad lived then?" or "That was when we moved to Nova Drive [an area in Glasgow's West End] so dad could be closer to work [Gartnavel Royal Hospital]" to "Fiona, you would have been a baby then, do you remember?" These responses placed a different emphasis on the material (and their geographies), than my encounter provided. This coincided with a very different response to the material elicited by Karen, who became visibly moved by viewing her father's handwriting. The physical presence of whom the handwriting alluded to, alongside the intimate familial moments that it charted, from her mother and father's first meeting to the birth

of her brothers and sisters, led to an emotionally charged encounter that emphasized that the relationships between lives and afterlives are not always easily negotiated.

What this unusual encounter between the archive, researcher, researched and their loved ones brought to the fore, was the difficulties and uncertainties in tracing a life in this way. In this case what was revealed through this encounter was painfully what were no longer there – a person, and most prominently, a father whose loss was felt and missed more than I could ever imagine. The experience of observing the recollections of the living framed by the papers of the dead in this encounter was clearly unsettling. However, the power of the archive, and the material it held in its domain, to invoke, inspire, and challenge in the creation and re-creation of lives was powerfully demonstrated. Adrian, Karen and Fiona's individual experiences with the archive led to the crafting of a different set of narratives about Laing, that although destabilised my own portrait, inspired me to think again about the ways in which I encountered the material that formed the foundations of my research, and the many lives of Laing that I may never get to know.

Spatial Stories of Lives

What this paper has demonstrated thus far is that there exists, in any research engaging with lives through the archive, a complex interplay of subjectivities, an on-going multi-layered entanglement of selves which transcends differences of time and space. Indeed, the tension between the multiple selves of research subjects and researchers seems to be inherent to the very practice of biographical research, which is, the more-or-less systematic rooting around in someone else's business. It is a process of picking over what remains, picking out what seems to matter, and pondering about what appears to be missing, culminating in the construction of new sets of stories. Whatever the intentions of the researcher, it is clear that the *re-presenting* of a life is part of a continuous *resurfacing* of the past.⁶⁰ As Norman Denzin has argued:

Lives and their experiences are represented in stories. They are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is being scraped over an old picture, something new becomes visible ... There is no truth in the painting of a life, only multiple images and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what now is.⁶¹

If, as Thomas Osborne has argued, the archive is a "center of interpretation," then it is a place where the fragments of lives past await the attention, or the interpretation, of historical geographers.⁶² The goal then, it might be argued, is to follow Denzin in thinking of subjects as uncertain in their rendering, to acknowledge the unsettling – at least for some – idea that there is no fixed identity or biographical reality.

Nicola Thomas, in her attention to the life of Lady Curzon, creatively embraces this situation when she acknowledges that there are "many refracted frames which cannot be reified into a single interpretation of the subject."⁶³ For Thomas, subjects are productively uncertain, and the role – the complicity – of the researcher in the process of constructing versions of the subject in their work is well understood. Beyond historical geography, this situation has arguably been debated further. In her attempts to understand her own life, the psychoanalyst Marion Milner (writing as Joanna Field) offers an exemplary illustration of this way of thinking about biography, about the writing of a life:

Slowly I realised that the facts were not separate things which were there for anyone to pick up, but an ever changing pattern against a boundless background of the unknown, an immense kaleidoscope changing constantly according to the different ways you looked at it.⁶⁴

Along with so many other things, positionality matters in the writing of a life, it shapes interpretation profoundly. Even, as Chris Philo has demonstrated, when the researcher's intentions are to avoid offering particular interpretations of subjectivity – in this case, through an engagement with the drawings of a mentally disturbed individual, a certain William James Blacklock – there appears to be an almost inescapable desire, perhaps need, to do so. For Philo, the raggedy sketches began to take certain shapes and so too did Blacklock, despite his best efforts to push the desire to interpret his subject in certain ways to one side.⁶⁵

A reasonable question, then, might be to ask what the historical geographer should do with these uncertain subjects? One response to this problem might be to think of the *spatial stories* of lives that might be told with the collected treasures and random detritus of the past encountered through the archive as alluded to in previous sections. While traditional biography has so often sought to present *the* life of the subject, in linear and sequential ways, some recent work by historical and cultural geographers has offered a different method or approach to the study a life. Subjects in these accounts are often engaged geographically, through an examination of some of the particular spaces and places in and through which their lives unfolded. Historical geographies of science have been at the forefront of this development, following David Livingstone's argument about the 'many Darwins':

Instead of the remorselessly sequential narrative that typically characterizes biographical accounts, greater sensitivity to the *spaces of life* could open up new and revealing ways of taking the *measure of a life*. Take Charles Darwin. Here the biographer encounters a number of different Darwins – Darwin the experimenter, Darwin the traveller, Darwin the invalid, Darwin the investor, Darwin the dupe of quack medicine ... In different spaces different Darwins would surface.⁶⁶

A "life geography," Livingstone writes, "would have much to commend it."⁶⁷ In her work on the nineteenth-century geographer Charles Daly, Karin Morin offers one approach to biography which follows Livingstone's lead: "I am not interested in delving into his personal psychology, inner struggles, and habits ... [rather] ... I attempt to draw out Daly's overarching geographical sensibilities and his *public persona as a geographer*."⁶⁸ Morin traces Daly through a number of spaces, namely "the study, the library, the lecture theatre, AGS offices, New York City, and the halls of Congress."⁶⁹ Her account draws upon particular sources which have clustered around a particular aspect of Daly's *self*, revealing perhaps, the fact that archival fragments themselves, have a geography that they speak of certain spatialities of life.

Attending to the spatialities of a life also encourages a stronger focus on what might be called the more-than-human assemblages which constitute that life. Thinking about subjects through particular spaces or places can help to draw out the influences of other factors and agents, including things as mundane as their preferred breakfast cereal, as Keighren has shown.⁷⁰ Following Doreen Massey we can also see how space itself – thought of as process – is important in the unfolding of a life. The acknowledgement of these kinds of details is important for understanding the complexity of the life under scrutiny.⁷¹ As Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift explain, with biography "[t]here is the difficulty of mapping something that cannot be counted as singular but only as a mass of different and sometimes conflicting subject positions."⁷² They argue that:

As bodies move they trace out a path from one location to another. These paths constantly intersect with those of others in a complex web of biographies. These others are not just human bodies but also all other objects that can be described as trajectories in time-space; animals, machines, trees, dwellings and so on.⁷³

A geographical focus on biography reveals that the sites of a life are never hermetically sealed but always composite, hybrid spaces, which extend spatially and temporally from their settings in lines which interweave. Lives are spatial, so their telling should reflect and embrace this. The lives of subjects are also thoroughly entwined with the lives and biographies of other things, and this too, should, where appropriate, be a feature of life-writing. In what follows, the spatial story of a life – that of William Dampier (1651-1715) – is briefly considered.

An Archival Exposition of William Dampier

The life of William Dampier has attracted a number of biographers.⁷⁴ How could it not? A pirate, a scientist, an explorer, and a best-selling author, among other things, his life is, in many respects, ideal fodder for biographical work. Born into a tenant-farming family in Somerset in 1651, Dampier was a curious individual who developed a keen eye for detail and difference in the natural world. The knowledge for which he became famous – though never wealthy – was gathered in practice, through activity and engagement, particularly through maritime exploration. Such knowledge was coveted by the chattering classes of London's many coffee-houses at the time. Indeed, as Richard Drayton has shown, much of the intellectual fervour of the late-seventeenth century depended upon the tales of mobile travelers like Dampier for its sustenance.⁷⁵ For the biographer, much of what can be known of Dampier is to be found in his published journals.⁷⁶ Dampier, unlike most authors of scientifically valuable works, was actively engaged in piracy during the time he 'collected data,' coupling the life of a (seemingly) rational gatherer of facts and experiences and the (seemingly) irrational plunderer of trade. The juxtaposition of these seemingly incompatible ways of life in one life is what has attracted so many writers to Dampier.⁷⁷

While the extant biographies of Dampier each have their merits, none really take seriously the spaces of his life. Elsewhere, William Hasty has argued that understanding the apparent juxtaposition of pirate and scientist, in fact requires sensitivity to the spatialities of his life.⁷⁸ Hasty makes the point that:

As a pirate with apparent gentlemanly aspirations Dampier has consistently figured as one of history's paradoxes, a man who embodied supposedly irreconcilable identities and ways of life ... Placing Dampier's knowledge aboard the pirate ship opens up the possibility for understanding the ways in which he creatively exploited the liberties of space and time that a life of piracy afforded.⁷⁹

Dampier the scientist very much depended upon Dampier the pirate. These two aspects of his identity were entwined aboard the pirate ship, entangled through a particular space. At the heart of this entanglement was the experience of *being* a sailor, a pirate, an observer of 'new' things in 'new' worlds. Encounters with a world of different sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes fill the pages of Dampier's journal. Of the Betel Nut he encountered in Mindanao, he reported that:

... it is most esteemed when it is young, and before it grows hard, and then they cut it only into two pieces with the green Husk of Shell on it. It is then exceedingly juicy, and the mouth makes much spit. It tastes rough in the Mouth, and dies the Lips red, and makes the Teeth black, but preserves them, and cleanseth the Gums. It is also accounted very wholsom for the Stomach; but sometimes it will cause great giddiness in the Head of those that are not used to chew it.⁸⁰

We should assume that Dampier's mundane routines as a pirate were "facilitative" in his pursuit of knowledge.⁸¹ Piracy provided Dampier the opportunity to experience the world as he did, but what was the world of the pirate like?

Understandably, he was not entirely frank about this in his writings. Scraps and fragments from Dampier's texts needed to be excavated for information about the pirate ship, and other documents – such as his manuscript journal held at the British Library and certain court documents – were required to provide details hidden or obscured in his published works.⁸² Reading these different documents together, often "against the grain" revealed details of the pirate ship deliberately neglected in Dampier's public presentation of *himself*.⁸³ Thinking with and through space revealed a Dampier beyond the striking juxtaposition, the sensational, and presented him as a complex agent, as a pirate and scientist. Writing a biography or biographical sketch of Dampier that accounted for his simultaneously being a pirate and a scientist required an attention to the geographies of his life. By examining Dampier aboard the pirate ship, it became clear where the overlaps between seemingly disparate identities exist, that is, they existed *in place*.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the differing ways in which historical geographers are working with notions of absence and abundance in biography and life-writing. In conjunction with other geographical approaches highlighted in this paper, we have sought to think more carefully about what a geographical approach to the creation of lives may bring and the differing approaches to the archive that it may incite. Each section has accounted for a different aspect of historical and cultural geographers' efforts to write embodied, sensitive and revealing biographies or life-writings. From considerations on how to navigate the tension between absence and abundance in the archive, the effort of working *with* fragments in the writing of lives through the archival encounter and how geographers have experimented with writing the spatial stories of lives, this paper has sought to demonstrate and reflect upon the increased sensibility to the geographies of the fragments of lives. Through our differently constructed and phrased examples, we wished to show the importance of finding pathways through absence and abundance, in order to navigate with our uncertain subjects a particular type of geographically infused archival encounter.

Finally, in returning to Morgan, whose poem shows how lives lose their traces and tangibility across time, there may be much to gain in viewing biography and life-writing in these ways. For the historical researcher, such inevitable loss leads biography and life-writing to be forever partial and uncertain. Yet, a geographical engagement with the archive, which embraces uncertain subjects, focusing on the sites, places and spaces of lives, forges new paths through, and beyond, which versions of lives can be told. Further, a geographical sensibility to the archive and to biographical subjects understands that just as lives have their geographies, so fragments have dispersed geographies of their own. By thinking more creatively about the complex interplay between what the archive holds and what is missing in the writing of lives, historical geographers have the opportunity to explore these fragments and their geographies in more depth, and create a diverse set of stories that center upon their uncertain subjects.

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